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THEE WILL I CHERISH
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Matthew 16:13-20

Here's a bit of relevant trivia. There are 17,000 books about Jesus in the Library of Congress, more than twice as many as any other figure in the entirety of human history. William Shakespeare comes in a distant second with half that many. 17,000 — and that's before Mel Gibson took the American popular culture by storm last spring.

What a time it was for the preachers — and still is. Between Dan Brown and *The DaVinci Code*, and Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, people are thinking about basic Christian beliefs more than any time — in my life time. Historians tell us that in the third and fourth centuries, people used to discuss Christology on the street corners — that "butchers and bakers" argued about whether Jesus was truly God or only like God — that there were popular songs and ditties about the finer points of Christology. People used to walk along the streets of Alexandria shouting: "There was when he was not" in Greek — which you will all recognize as the undistilled — and spine tingling heresy of pure Aryanism. I was never sure I believed that before *The Passion* was released on Ash Wednesday.

But last February and March Jesus was everywhere, and people were literally talking about him on the street corners.

My wife and I were walking down Michigan Avenue on a Saturday afternoon in Lent. We stopped at Tiffany's because Rosalie works there. We're friends. She's the mother of my youngest son's best buddy. She's Jewish. "Have you seen it?" she asked. "You know, *The Passion* … I did and I hated it." Whereupon Kim, another clerk, joined the conversation. Kim is a member of Fourth Presbyterian Church. Rosalie said: "Kim and I have been discussing it all week. She loved it." Whereupon, Steve, Kim's boyfriend appeared. Steve is a happy pagan, hadn't darkened the door of a church since high school. Kim made him go to see *The Passion of the Christ* with her. "What did you think?" I asked. "It was pretty awesome" he said: "how he suffered and died. I couldn't get it outa my mind. Was all that stuff true?"

So, standing at the jewelry counter we had a seminar on Christology. And, sure enough, Steve came to church with Kim the next Sunday.

One of the things we all learned I suspect is that how you responded to this movie about Jesus depended a lot on what you brought to it.

I saw it at a private screening sponsored by the *Christian Century,* The American Jewish Committee and six churches. My Jewish friends did not like it.

When Jews and Christians see Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, they see two different movies. Christians are inclined to see a graphic visualization of God's incredible love revealed in the voluntary suffering and death of Jesus. Jews, out of their own history, know that when Christians reenact the passion of Christ, Jews get blamed for the crucifixion. They are called "Christ killers." When Jews see the Roman governor Pontius Pilate portrayed sympathetically and Jewish religious leaders portrayed negatively, as Mel Gibson does, they become nervous—and I understand, and so should we all, regardless of what we see in the film.

African American theologian, Robert Franklin, made an additional and helpful observation. White Christians and black Christians see two different films.

Professor Franklin wrote, "The icons, art, and passion plays in most white churches are pretty sanitary. Jesus is a manicured, middle class, model citizen, almost like one of the neighbors. The theology that underwrites this sanitized Jesus avoids the brutal manifestation of oppression and violence he experienced."

Franklin says that "Most black audiences will see things differently. Since the slave period, blacks have understood the suffering of a grassroots leader who was the victim of state-supported terror. Black viewers," he says, "may find themselves revisiting painful memories of young men from our community who were hanged from trees with drenched, bloodstained clothes as local townspeople look on with satisfaction. We know what that young Jewish mother Mary felt. . . . We feel the grief and indignation deep in our souls"

Different people see different stories.

In the meantime, the figure of Jesus towers over it all. He has been on the cover of every national news magazine, the entertainment and arts sections, even page one of major newspapers.

Everybody, it seems, has an opinion. Everybody has something to say about Jesus.

A friend sent an email telling that in a recent poll Jesus of Nazareth was voted the thirteenth most important American of all time. Two new books are receiving a lot of attention. Stephen Prothero's *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*. Prothero says that Americans are fascinated by Jesus almost obsessively and transform him to meet the needs of each age. Protestants alone, Prothero says, have portrayed Jesus "as socialist and a capitalist, a pacifist and a warrior, a Civil Rights activist and a Ku Klux Klansman." Currently, he says, we prefer a "Mr. Rogers Jesus: a neighborly fellow one can know and imitate."

Richard Fox, has written another popular study, *Jesus in America,* which observes the unusually important role Jesus, and Americans' diverse understandings of him, have played in American history and culture since the Revolutionary War.

We even want to know what Jesus really looked like. What we know for sure is that he didn't look like Salmon's Head of Christ that adorned every Sunday School room wall in my childhood — or — James Caviezel, Gibson's Jesus, who the *New York Times* called a "certifiable Hollywood hunk." The average man in Jesus' day was 5′3″ and weighed 110 pounds. So CNN commissioned a medical artist to use available archeological evidence and come up with a prototype first-century Palestinian Jewish face. The result, the *Times* said, was disappointing — Jesus looked like a little like a New York taxi driver.

Who was he? Who is he? The question and the discussion and the argument begin almost immediately after his death and resurrection. Some thought he was the greatest teacher—rabbi—who ever lived. Others thought he was a political revolutionary. Still others believed he was the long-awaited Messiah, "Christ" in Greek. Some called him Son of Man, his favorite title for himself; others called him Son of God; still others argued that he was God in the flesh. Human? Divine? Son of Man? Son of God? Revelation of God? God incarnate?

The discussion rages for three centuries until the Roman emperor Constantine convenes Christian bishops in the city of Nicaea, and for several years they talk and debate and argue and threaten one another—literally—until they finally come up with a statement that Jesus is both human and divine.

> We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
> the only Son of God,
> eternally begotten of the Father,
> God from God, Light from Light
> true God from true God
> begotten, not made,

of one Being with the Father . . .
(The Nicene Creed)

There it is in ancient language and ancient intellectual categories.

One time, the question emerged during his lifetime. It's in the middle of the story. Jesus and his disciples are walking along, talking, and he asks them, "Who are they saying I am? What are people saying about me?"

They answer, "Some are saying you are John the Baptist, others say you are Elijah or one of the prophets come back to life."

Then he turns his gaze and his question on them: "But you—who do you say that I am?"

So far as we know the topic had not come up before. We just don't know what they thought about him when they decided to cast their lot with him and follow him. My sense is that they were captivated by his person, his strength and clarity of teaching, his love and compassion toward all, his gift of welcoming all, including all: that special gift of God that all great people have of focusing on and attending to and listening to whomever it is who comes to them. They were attracted, compelled, but I don't think they had his identity figured out. They resisted any notion that he might suffer and die.

There was that one shining moment: "Who do you say that I am?" "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God," Simon blurted out, in an impetuous moment in which he said far more than he understood.

Faith in Jesus Christ is like that, I believe. Often it is to say more and trust more and commit more than we can understand or explain.

In any event, that story in Matthew 16 has always seemed to me to be pivotal. In fact, when it came time to write a thesis in Divinity School, I chose to do it on this passage. I actually translated the passage from the Greek, did a word study of each word, read and reported what everybody said about the passage from antiquity up to the present. I compared the passage to similar incidents in other religions. I brought in literature, art, history to illustrate. There were literally pages of footnotes. Footnotes count a lot.

When it came time to start preaching sermons I turned, whenever possible, to Matthew 16, which I figured I really knew and understood. On one of those early occasions, I used the passage for a sermon in my home church and I'll never forget something my father said afterward. He was very supportive, complimented me on my sermon. But then astutely, wisely, said:

“You told us what everybody in history thought about Jesus. Next time, save a little time at the end for what you believe.” He was a railroad fireman but he cut through my determined attempt, finely honed in Divinity School, to turn Christian faith into a series of intellectually palatable and defensible propositions. Dad went right to the heart of the matter — which is exactly what ‘credo’ means.

It is not, finally, a matter of what we think. I keep returning to the passage and now believe that its importance is not in what Peter says: “You are the Christ, the son of the living God.” In fact, a few moments later Peter will show that he hasn’t the foggiest notion of what his affirmation really means. Later still, Peter’s confident clarity disappears entirely, and he will deny even knowing Jesus. In the years since writing my paper, with all those footnotes, I conclude that the passage’s importance and relevance is in what happens next, when Jesus says, “And you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church.”

Peter calls Jesus a name—“Christ”—he, Peter, doesn’t really understand. Jesus calls Simon “Peter”—gives him a new name and a new vocation, a new life to live — a job to do.

We American Christians spend a lot of time and energy in getting our beliefs about Jesus sorted out. Children of the Enlightenment, we think that it’s a matter of our intellect first: we want to get our theology in place before we commit and trust and follow. In fact it’s the other way around in the Bible. People are attracted to Jesus, compelled by Jesus, start to follow and then love and trust Jesus, long before they can say exactly what they believe about him.

Professor James Fowler, in a classic text about the subject of how children and adults come to faith, writes, “Belief is the holding of certain ideas. . . . Faith is deeper, richer, more personal. Belief is a function of mind. . . . Faith involves an alignment of the heart or will” (*Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning).*

And Catholic theologian Hans Küng writes, “Jesus never questioned anyone about the true faith, nor asked anyone to profess his or her orthodoxy. He expects no theoretical reflection, but an urgent, practical decision (*Christianity and the World Religions*, p. 116).

I know people who are ready to insist that you must believe certain doctrinal formulas about Jesus to be true before you can be a Christian.

I know people in the church who aren’t sure they belong inside because they’re not sure what exactly they believe.

And I know people on the outside, looking in, because they don't have their beliefs all sorted out and assume that everyone on the inside does.

We need the reminder that Jesus invited people to follow, not take a theology quiz; invited people to live new lives of love and forgiveness and compassion, not recite creeds.

I do not mean to denigrate theology or doctrine or creeds. Far from it — standing in this pulpit — in this place. I simply mean to say, because I too need the reminder, that faith is not a list of beliefs but an alignment of heart and will. Faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is not just embracing ideas about him but deciding to live for him. I do not mean to denigrate the wonderfully Presbyterian tradition of loving God with our minds.

It's why I am a Presbyterian.

But it has been my experience that understanding sometimes follows, not precedes, commitment to him. Albert Schweitzer, by the way, said that beautifully years ago:

> He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old by the lakeside, he came to those who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word—"Follow me." . . . And to those who obey, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings through which they shall pass in his fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their experience who he is." (*The Quest for the Historical Jesus*)

Who do you say that I am?

There was one scene in Mel Gibson's movie that touched my heart. I was watching, analyzing, noting deviations from the text and violent exaggerations—and one scene transformed my response from head to heart. In the middle of Jesus' incredibly tortuous journey through the streets of Jerusalem, carrying his cross, beaten relentlessly, falling down, his mother, Mary, runs around the crowd, pushes her way through, and comes to him and kneels beside him as he has fallen again: bleeding, broken, on his way to die. She tenderly strokes his face. She has a flashback to a day, long ago, when he was a boy of seven or eight and he had fallen down and hurt himself, and instinctively she had run to him and gathered him in her arms, rocked him and comforted him.

Kathleen Falsani, a movie critic for the *Chicago Sun Times* wrote*:* "Yes, Jesus was God. But he was also a man, a man with a mother who loved him

and friends and a career and doubts and fears, who chose to die a horrible, painful death in order to save the world that killed him."

"The haunting allure of Jesus," distinguished theologian Joseph Sittler so simply put it.

I believe he was fully human and that there is nothing about our human experience as men and women that he did not also experience—nothing. And I believe he was divine, that in him God has experienced our human life and that in him, in his life, and kindness and mercy and forgiveness and long-suffering integrity, I see the clearest picture of God any one of us can ever see. And I believe he will be with us always, all our days right up to the last one—and beyond.

But the point is, you don't have to pass a test in order to claim him as your Lord and Savior; you just need to fall in line and follow him, join that long line of saints and sinners, wise and simple, holy and worldly, who have seen in him truth to live and die for.

I love something John Calvin once said about creeds, those human attempts to put into words all the faith and trust and love in our hearts. "Sing," Calvin said. "Sing your creeds because we can always sing more than we can say."

What I sing—hum quietly or silently—is an old hymn we used to sing in Sunday School a lot, *Fairest Lord Jesus*—a phrase at the end of the first verse:

> Thee will I cherish
> Thee will I honor
> Thou my soul's glory,
> Joy, and crown.

Help me sing it now.